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NEW VARIANT AND OLD FEARS

Many European countries have pressed the panic button even as the WHO is yet to make its assessment of the variant with high number of mutations public

Variant: B.1.1.529

Found in: Botswana and Hong Kong (in travellers from South Africa)

Risk factor: Under assessment

WHO meeting: Friday's emergency discussions focus on variant's possible effects and giving it a Greek alphabet denomination

COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

- South Africa
- Lesotho
- Botswana
- Zimbabwe
- Mozambique
- Namibia
- Eswatini

Why's Europe worried?

- Cases have leaptfrogged 11% over the past week
- WHO's grim prediction that the winter toll may cross 7,00,000
- Belgium has become the first EU country to detect a case

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UNCERTAINTY RETURNS AS NEW MUTANT SPREADS

Equity markets crash, oil prices tumble

ARSHAD KHAN & RAKESH KUMAR @ New Delhi

REPORTS of a heavily mutated Covid-19 variant on Friday sent global and domestic equity markets into a tizzy. Indian equity markets saw ₹4.5 lakh crore worth of investors' wealth getting eroded as both the benchmark indices - BSE Sensex and NSE Nifty - fell by around 3%. US stocks opened lower while London's benchmark fell by 3.3% at the opening. Tokyo, Shanghai, Frankfurt and Hong Kong also fell.

The tremors were also felt in the global oil market as well, as Brent Crude shed over 10% to trade around \$73.34 a barrel on Friday. India's equity market saw its biggest single day fall in recent times on Friday. The Sensex shed 1,688 points or 2.87% to close at 57,107, and the Nifty was

down 510 points or 2.91% to 17,027. Friday's bloodbath was caused by discovery of a new mutation of coronavirus in Africa (B.1.1.529), which poses another set of challenges to global economic recovery.

Amit Gupta, fund manager, portfolio management services at ICICI Securities said, "Nervousness on the new variant and expectations of US increasing the pace of tapering have led to recent market weakness. This trend may take some time to recover as the WHO meeting on the new mutant variant impact and hospitalisation rates in US and Europe will be watched by the market very closely."

Other than the discovery of the new Covid variant, the release of crude oil reserves by the US and other countries

leading to an increase in global supply also caused the 10% drop in oil prices.

Recently, the US had made a request to some of the world's largest oil-consuming nations, including China, India and Japan, to release oil from their strategic reserves to check the skyrocketing prices. India and the US decided to release 5 million and 50 million barrels of oil, respectively, from their stockpile. According to the findings of a panel of experts that advises ministers of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), such release is likely to perk up supplies further in the coming months. OPEC and its allies, a group known as OPEC+, are set to meet on December 2 to weigh their options.

FLIGHT PLAN	
Category	Capacity
At risk with bubble agreement	75% of pre-Covid operations
At risk without bubble agreement	50% bilateral capacity arrangements
Not at risk	Full capacity under bilateral agreements

BLOODBATH IN MARKETS	
₹4.5 lakh cr	Investors' wealth eroded
3.3%	Fall in London's benchmark
10%	Drop in Brent Crude to trade around \$73.34 a barrel
1,688	Points shed by Sensex
510	Points shed by Nifty

NATIONWIDE NOV 25	
Fresh cases	9,116
Recoveries	10,264
Deaths	306
KARNATAKA NOV 25	
Fresh cases	306
Recoveries	226
Deaths	2

Regular int'l flights to resume on Dec 15

KUMAR VIKRAM @ New Delhi

THE Ministry of civil Aviation on Friday announced the resumption of scheduled international flights to and from India from December 15. The ministry, however, said certain restrictions would apply to countries based on their risk assessment and air-bubble deals.

Countries categorised as at-risk and having air bubble agreement with India would resume 75% of pre-Covid scheduled international flights or a minimum of seven frequencies a week, whichever is higher. Countries under the at-risk category include the UK, South Africa, Brazil, Bangladesh, Botswana, China, Mauritius, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Singapore and Hong Kong.

An order issued by the civil aviation ministry said the decision was taken after consultations with the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Resumption of international passenger services would imply reversion to bilaterally-agreed capacity and termination of the air bubble arrangements.

Countries identified as not 'at-risk' by the Health Ministry would get full capacity entitlements according to the bilateral air service agreements. For a country identified as 'at-risk' and not having an air-bubble agreement, only 50% of bilateral capacity entitlements or 50% of pre-Covid operations, whichever is higher, would be permitted.

Bilateral air service agreements are signed between countries to operate scheduled passenger flights. This determines the number of airlines, ports of entries and total flights weekly that can be allowed. Under air bubble agreements, airlines of two countries operate special flights under certain restrictions.

"The seats under air bubble arrangement that have already been sold by airlines, which are more than the capacity entitlements under bilateral air service agreements, will be allowed to be operated till December 14, 2021," the aviation ministry said, adding such airlines would restrict their operations to capacity entitlements under bilateral air service agreements with effect from December 15.

Dynastic politics biggest threat to democracy: Modi

PM targets Congress as 14 opposition parties boycott Constitution Day event in Parliament



EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

WITH 14 opposition parties including the Congress, the TMC, the DMK and the Left parties boycotting the Constitution Day event in the Central Hall of Parliament on Friday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tore into family-run parties calling them a danger to democracy.

Noting that dynastic parties are a matter of concern to people committed to the Constitution, Modi said, "More than one person from a family joining the party on the basis of merit does not make the party dynastic. Problems arise when a party is run by the same family, generation after generation."

Targeting the Opposition parties that boycotted the event, Modi said the country will not listen to those who turn their back on an important event to respect the Constitution, which has the name of Babasaheb Ambedkar attached to it.

"When a political party loses its own democratic character, how can it protect democracy? Today, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, look at every corner of India, the country is moving towards a crisis that should worry every individual who respects the Constitution and that

comes from dynastic parties. This is against the principles of the Constitution," the PM said.

Elaborating on the spirit behind celebrating the Constitution Day, Modi said it was initiated in 2015. Modi recalled how he faced resistance when the idea to dedicate a day in the name of the Constitution was

'Boycott to protest authoritarian govt'

Justifying its decision to boycott the Constitution Day event in Parliament, the Congress said it was to register its protest against the authoritarian functioning of the Narendra Modi-led government at the Centre

mooted. "I remember when I was addressing the House in 2015 on B R Ambedkar's 125th anniversary and making this announcement, even then there was resistance. Why are you doing this? What is the need?" the Prime Minister said.

Speaking on the occasion, the President Ram Nath Kovind said, "All Members of Parliament are defenders of the dignity of Parliament, whether they represent the ruling party or the Opposition."

Worrying trend as 4 Covid clusters pop up in state

RANJANI MADHAVAN, AMIT S UPADHYE & KARTHIK KK @ Bengaluru, Hubballi, Mysuru

AT least four Covid clusters have erupted in Karnataka over the last few days — two in Bengaluru, and one each in Dharwad and Mysuru — in a worrying turnaround from a steady decline amid fears of a new SARS-CoV-2 virus variant entering the country.

A day after news broke of two Covid clusters in educational institutions in Dharwad and Bengaluru, 12 students of Spurthy College of Nursing in Marsur, Anekal in Bengaluru tested positive on Friday. The other existing cluster was the one detected on Thursday at The International School Bangalore (TISB), a residential educational institution that saw 33 students and one staffer being infected.

While Bengaluru's two clusters have 46 positive cases, Dharwad's SDM Medical College reported a total of 204 cases, of which 138 were reported on Friday. The Mysuru cluster is from two private nursing colleges — St Joseph's Nursing College and Cauvery Nursing



Relatives of patients wait outside the gates of SDM Medical College. The entry of visitors was restricted after a Covid outbreak, in Dharwad on Friday | EXPRESS

College — where 48 cases have been detected over the last few days, of which 25 were reported on Friday. However, most of the cases are asymptomatic, while those with symptoms have a mild infection.

In Bengaluru, a health officer said, "The nursing college students were tested on Thursday and the reports turned out to be positive on Friday. None of them had any travel history. All, except one, are vaccinated." The lone student who had not received the shot had tested Covid positive previously and did not take the vaccine after that. Nine students are symptomatic with mild symptoms, while three are asymptomatic. The nine have been isolated at a Covid Care Centre in Jigani.

ACTIVE CASES CLIMBING	
There is a sudden spurt in Covid-19 cases in the state. Active cases which were on the decline are on the rise, while recovery rate which was climbing, stayed at 98.50 on Friday. Bengaluru saw its recovery rate falling from 98.25% to 98.28%	
STATEWIDE	B'LRU
Nov 24 6,412 cases	Nov 24 5,117 cases
Nov 25 6,492 cases (Increase of 1.24%)	Nov 25 5,141 cases (Increase of 0.46%)
Nov 26 6,611 cases (Increase of 1.83%)	Nov 26 5,235 cases (Increase of 1.82%)

EXPRESS READ

Putin in India on Dec 6 for annual summit

New Delhi: Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit India on December 6 for the 21st annual summit. Narendra Modi and Putin are likely to touch upon a number of issues, with specific outcomes expected in expanding ties in the areas of defence, trade and energy. P9

1st Test: Bright start by NZ after Shreyas' ton

Kanpur: New Zealand's Will Young and Tom Latham put on 129 runs, first century partnership by a visiting team openers since 2016. Young is unbeaten on 75 and Latham 50. Shreyas Iyer completed his century on debut with a knock of 105. P10

Tech City has no electricity to give this govt school

ASHWINI M SRIPAD @ Bengaluru

THE contrast could not be starker. The political power centre and tech capital of the country Bengaluru is home to a government school that runs without electricity for the last seven years.

Students attend classes in the open and run into classrooms when it rains. As it is dark inside, the lone teacher for the school lights a candle and continues with classes.

The Government Tamil Higher Primary School, which was started in 1930, is situated on Commissariat Road in Ashok Nagar that is just 4 km from Vidhana Soudha. Ten students from classes 1 to 9 attend



The 91-year-old Government Tamil Higher Primary school on Commissariat Road in Bengaluru does not have power supply for the last seven years | ASHWINI M SRIPAD

the school, while only one teacher is assigned to them. The power connection to the school was cut seven years ago, as it could not afford to pay the electricity bills, said sources

from the Department of Public Instruction.

Neither the Education Department nor the elected representative has taken interest in reviving the school, said sources from the Department. "The number of students too has been going down over the years. Moreover, the school is situated in a prime commercial area, close to Garuda Mall. Vested interests want it shut so that they can use this piece of land for commercial activities," they added.

Official sources confirmed that there is indeed a proposal to demolish the building. That is also one of the reasons why there is no interest in resuming power supply to the school, they said. CONTINUED ON: P7

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